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SOUTH AFRICA - ZIMBABWE: Secret War Widens
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South African covert operations in Zimbabwe appear to be increasing despite the improvement in economic relations between the two countries. Pressure from the US and other Western nations probably has led South Africa to pursue closer economic ties with Harare. On the other hand, growing dissident violence in Zimbabwe following Joshua Nkomo's ouster from the cabinet in February appears to have encouraged hardliners in Pretoria to pursue tougher policies toward Zimbabwe. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] reports that two white junior officers in the Zimbabwean Air Force recently confessed to taking part in the attack in July on Zimbabwe's main airbase near Gweru that damaged about 20 percent of the country's combat aircraft. They implicated several senior white officers and claimed the operation was carried out by former members of the Air Force now working for the South African military. [REDACTED]

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Other evidence of recent covert activity includes a public acknowledgment by Pretoria that three soldiers killed in Zimbabwe in August were ex-Rhodesian whites serving in the South African Army. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] reports the deaths occurred during a reconnaissance mission--which had been personally authorized by the South African Chief of Defense--against an African National Congress base believed to be in Zimbabwe. [REDACTED]

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A prisoner captured last month in Zimbabwe claims he was part of a 500-man group trained in South Africa for small-unit terrorist missions against both black and white Zimbabweans. Zimbabwean security forces reportedly have captured 17 other South African-sponsored dissidents in the past three months. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] reports that two white Zimbabwean intelligence officers were arrested earlier this year for spying for the South Africans. They have admitted to taking part in several operations conducted by a special unit composed of ex-Rhodesians, including the assassination in July 1981 of the senior ANC leader

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15 September 1982

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in Zimbabwe and the explosion in August 1981 that destroyed a large ammunition dump near Harare. They also had a part in the bombing in December 1981 of the ruling party's headquarters in Harare at a time when the party's Central Committee normally would have been scheduled to meet. [redacted] 25X1

Pretoria's Plans

A new centralized command structure headed by a brigadier general oversees the covert operations. [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] senior military intelligence officers recently approved plans for a newly formed special operations unit to infiltrate ex-Rhodesians into Zimbabwe to make contact with white and black dissident groups. This unit is to encourage terrorist activities and general unrest against Prime Minister Mugabe. [redacted] 25X1

The South Africans also are creating a regular Army battalion composed primarily of former members of the Rhodesian security forces. This force, assigned to military intelligence, is stationed at Messina near the South Africa - Zimbabwe border and held available for possible deployment in Zimbabwe, Namibia, or Mozambique. [redacted] 25X1

By mid-August agents reportedly were working with dissident white groups in Zimbabwe and were attempting to establish direct contact with Nkomo. The special operations unit may have been overstepping its charter, however. The cabinet-level committee that oversees foreign policy and security matters reportedly has responded to US warnings by withholding authorization for destabilization operations. [redacted] 25X1

Growing Economic Ties

While South African subversive activity continues, economic relations between the two countries appear to be improving. Unlike a year ago, commerce goes on without interruption, and a new preferential trade agreement probably will be signed by the end of the year. Pretoria extended the existing arrangement, which is quite favorable to Zimbabwe, beyond its scheduled termination last March. [redacted] 25X1

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Private economic contacts also are increasing, as reflected by the visit to Zimbabwe in July of a delegation from the South African Chamber of Industries. The visit culminated in an invitation to Zimbabwe's Finance Minister to travel to South Africa in October. [REDACTED] 25X1

Outlook

Pretoria's covert policies toward Zimbabwe, although on a smaller scale, resemble those being pursued against South Africa's principal regional antagonists, Angola and Mozambique. In addition to direct attacks on insurgents based in those countries, South Africa secretly backs antigovernment forces there. Pretoria's aim has been to foment domestic unrest and to deter black African support of South African insurgent groups, but it may ultimately hope to bring more compliant regimes to power. [REDACTED] 25X1

South Africa probably does not view Zimbabwe as an immediate threat like Angola or Mozambique. Senior South African officials, however, frequently express the view that Zimbabwe is irretrievably on the road to becoming an impoverished and chaotic Marxist state like others in black Africa. The increasing domestic turmoil in Zimbabwe over the past months probably reinforces this impression and strengthens the hand of those in Pretoria advocating tougher policies toward Harare. [REDACTED] 25X1

Although most Zimbabweans are convinced that South Africa is trying to subvert the Zimbabwean Government through covert actions, Harare is reluctant to confront Pretoria over these incidents. A senior Zimbabwean official privately states that Mugabe knows he needs to maintain trade relations with South Africa, despite its secret war against him. He knows he cannot afford to close the South African trade office in retaliation for South African provocations. [REDACTED] 25X1

Zimbabwe is economically dependent on South Africa, a fact reinforced by sabotage operations by South African - backed insurgents in Mozambique against one of Zimbabwe's main transport routes to the sea. This dependence probably will prevent Zimbabwe from retaliating against South Africa, but Harare may increasingly blame the US for failing to rein in Pretoria. [REDACTED] 25X1